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What have we done with the bodies? Bodyliness in drama education research

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How the body appears, is theorised and researched in drama education and applied drama is what concerns me here. In the wider world of theory and research into drama and performance, the body features as component of meaning-making in theory and analysis (see e.g., Counsell and Wolf, 2001, Conroy, 2010). Yet, although the body figures in drama education research, my argument is that theoretical and methodological approaches to the socially organised, dramatic and dramatized body remain ripe for development, particularly in looking for the ways in which the presence and co-presence of bodies make meaning in drama.

Over the time I have been teaching and researching into drama education, the physical presence of diverse, energetic, creatively expressive and sometimes recalcitrant students has been one of the most impressive aspects of my experience. Sometimes, not always, when students 'click into' what Cecily O'Neill has referred to as "drama worlds" (1995), the walls of drama studios drop away, school uniforms seem to vanish, and students are transformed and transported into other places and times. The bodies of students then seem to lose their fixity, becoming plastic, malleable, but nevertheless remaining very material presences.

In the first issue of RiDE, I wrote about the importance of looking at and understanding the role of the body in learning drama. The argument arose because, although there was mention of drama 'embodiment' and 'body language' in relation to learning in drama, little writing on drama education at that time focused on the material presence and co-presence of the socially organised and enculturated body. Rather, there was a tendency to see right through the bodily presence of students to get at learning. The ghostliness of the body appeared to me as emblematic of the continued dominance of a dualistic view of learning, one that separates mind from body. It is as if the making of meaning and the processes of learning can be entirely abstracted from the social and individual bodies of students.

Drama can be said to represent and encapsulate aspects of the material world of human relations through bodied interactions and encounters located in place and time. Learning in drama draws on learners' practical knowledge of situated human relations and their abilities to select, shape and enact aspects of the social world. It is learning shaped in part by teachers' knowledge of dramatic forms and processes in relation to their understanding of students as people and associated patterns of learning. The teacher's role is therefore one of complex mediation, negotiating between material aspects of social relations and the aesthetic shapes and forms of drama, leading students and encouraging them to populate and enliven particular dramatic spaces.

Neglect of whole person learning in drama, learning that involves mind and body is, then, a puzzling omission. Making meaning in and through drama is most clearly realised in the work of socially organised and enculturated bodies. Some caveats, however – emphasis on the social organisation and enculturation of the body is crucial in avoiding over-simplistic, individualising, essentialising or dualistic accounts separating mind, meaning and learning from bodily presence and action. To be clear, this is neither to think of bodies without minds nor minds without bodies. It is, rather, a holistic view of bodily presence and co-presence that is strongly articulated with thinking and feeling. It is to emphasise both the materiality and plasticity of the meaning-making body, its mutability in action and perception and its profound implication in learning.

Such meaning-making mobilises sets of intimately connected and mutually constitutive, dialogical processes that, on one hand, consist of communicating with others and, on the other, involve processes of internalisation to make sense of the world to and for ourselves. It is a view shaped by a social, cultural and historical approach to learning in which action, patterns of social interaction and the mediating role of culture are seen as crucial to human development (see Vygotsky, 1997, 1967/2004).

The idea of the teacher as involved in teaching and learning as a process of complex mediation is not to view it as an abstracted process, therefore, but rather to see the

implication of the cultural world as mediated in the making of signs and meanings. In looking at bodies as flexible and mutable meaning-making entities is to recognise the multimodal affordances of the human form, and to regard the signs and meanings produced by bodies as generated out of socially organised and motivated activity (Kress, 2010). We are only able to glimpse and sense human interiorities of thinking, feeling and learning through the ways in which they are made manifest in physical form.

What, then, has there been over the last twenty years in RiDE to acknowledge the presence, co-presence and significance of meaning-making bodies in drama and its relation to learning? To find out, I combed through RiDE's archive using the search terms 'the body', 'bodies' and 'embodiment'. Rather than fill remaining space with lists of bracketed references, I will attempt briefly to characterise findings from this search.

Two broad trends emerged in trawling through RiDE articles that indicated steady (but not necessarily increasing) reference to the body. First, in researches into drama as part of formal education, there is a strand of inquiry and theory-making in which authors have referred to 'embodiment' as a significant concept in learning drama. Second, in looking at practical instances of drama in classrooms and studios, 'body language' was a term that surfaced in a number of papers. These are terms that, on the whole, tend to be treated as transparent, requiring little in the way of further definition or discussion.

My eye was caught when, in one article, Faith Guss wrote about a "body-gestural symbol system", a system that embodies and actualises experience (2005, 5). In another, Wan-Jun Wang wrote about "the re-inscription of body and space" in relation to "a re-negotiation of certain ethical values" (2010, 574). Both pieces carry the promise of a more fully defined conception of the body that might be applied as a means of analysis and explanation of how meanings are made in drama. Despite such acknowledgements of the role of the body in drama, ways in which the body 'inscribed', or how a 'body-gestural symbol system' is articulated, remain relatively underdeveloped in theoretical terms or in analysis.

Another, larger category of writing referring to the body and bodyliness in drama and performance, presenting a more fully discussed and theorised approach, comes from practitioners working in drama with marginalised groups. This has included work with refugees, people disaffected with and alienated from the mainstream – people in war zones, people with disabilities, those who were dealing with issues of gender and sexuality and so forth. In these papers, adherence is largely to phenomenological frames of reference, through which bodily experience and activity are connected with thinking and feeling, pain and beauty. In other words, the making of meaning in communication and perception, thinking and feeling are strongly integrated in and with bodily presence and co-presence (e.g., Thompson, 2006, McNamara, 2007). Katie Beswick, on the other hand, explicitly focuses on the body and its role in making place and space, asserting that “it is through the body that one comes to know the world” (2011, 428). The question that remains for me, however, is how do we come to know what is known about the world except through material exteriorities, that is, how the body signifies feeling, thinking and knowing? What frames of analysis and explanation might bring the socially organised, dramatized body into sharper focus?

In a compact monograph on theatre and the body, Colette Conroy has argued that “the body can be used as an analytic strategy or vantage point. The relationship between performance and culture can tell us much about both” (2010, 5). In telling of the relationship between performance, culture and learning, we need to continue to develop theoretical and methodological tools to bring the body, drama and learning into clearer focus. A generalised and largely unexamined use of the term ‘embodiment’ will not do, at least not for me. Embodiment is a term too susceptible to metaphorical slippage through which no explicit reference is made to physical presence at all. Rather, the concept of embodiment becomes a means of reifying particular ideas or practices – in other words, the term ‘embodiment’ is prone to being emptied of a sense of the physicality and material sociality of our bodies. The tendency toward metaphorical slippage is one reason for my preference for the use of the term ‘bodyliness’.

So, by way of conclusion, what I would like to encourage via this provocation is closer

attention to the socially organised and sense making body in research in drama education and applied performance. This is not to claim that focusing solely on exteriorities of dramatic and dramatized bodies is always and everywhere sufficient or necessary to researching meaning-making and learning in drama. Theorising interiorities – the processes of perception, thinking and feeling in response to phenomena in the world – and accounting for the settings and dimensions of context are, of course, important and necessary. It's simply that, when researching drama education, perhaps we ought to remember what we do with the bodies, where to put them and how best to treat them.

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